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Call off the summit if Daniloff isn't freed

WASHINGTON — By failing to make clear immediately that the Soviet detention of Nicholas Daniloff wouldn't be brooked, the Reagan administration put U.S. reporters everywhere overseas in jeopardy.

Instead of forcibly conveying outrage, the administration merely blustered — and pursued business as usual. Talks on arms control and Afghanistan began as scheduled Tuesday; pre-summit meetings are on track.

History doesn't record any Soviet leader losing a night's sleep, or sobbing into his pillow, over angry words from either White House press secretaries or U.S. presidents.

Every Third World tot learns at his or her mother's knee the canard that U.S. newsmen are agents of the CIA. That conviction is reinforced when the Soviet Union and China toss off such charges.

Last July Chinese security agents held *New York Times* correspondent John Burns and claimed he'd committed espionage while on a motorcycle trip. They later backed off and decided he'd violated travel restrictions.

By failing to respond with more than talk (the Soviet Union and China aren't impressed; they wrote the book on tough talk), the administration tacitly equates the arrest of Daniloff or Burns with that of the Soviet U.N. employee accused of buying classified information from an informant.

The administration could show that it's serious in rejecting the outrageous suggestion that Daniloff is a secret agent. It can simply threaten to call

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off any summit: "No Daniloff now, no summit." The summit shows little promise of accomplishing more than last November's tournament of press-agentry at Geneva anyway.

In addition to buttressing Third World biases, the Soviet action makes reporters — who operate without diplomatic immunity and gather information that authoritarian nations brand as sensitive (the mean annual snowfall in the Soviet Union is said to be classified) — fair game for harassment.

Daniloff, for example, was known for meeting almost weekly with Soviet dissidents in his pursuit of news. His descriptions of the rigors of everyday life in the Soviet Union were said to have disturbed Soviet officials far more than the esoteric analyses of arms control by his colleagues.

The Soviet focus on him, just as he was about to end his tour of duty, suggests two motives: To get back Zakharov, whom they obviously value highly. And to discourage U.S. news organizations from assigning to Moscow knowledgeable people like Daniloff (he comes from a distinguished Russian emigre family, speaks Russian, has a matchless knowledge of history and government) who can do more than pass along Kremlin press releases.

The Reagan administration, so forthright in slapping down pipsqueak communist dictatorships, now has an opportunity to show a superpower that it's capable of dealing with more than mice that roar.